A NORTON CRITICAL EDITION

BEN JONSON'S PLAYS AND MASQUES

Authoritative Texts of
VOLPONE • EPICOENE • THE ALCHEMIST
THE MASQUE OF BLACKNESS •
MERCURY VINDICATED FROM THE
ALCHEMISTS AT COURT • PLEASURE
RECONCILED TO VIRTUE

Contexts
Backgrounds and Sources
Criticism

SECOND EDITION

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Volpone
or
The Fox

The Persons of the Play

VOLPONE, a magnifico  
MOSCA, his parasite  
VOLTORE, an advocate  
CORBACCIO, an old gentleman  
CORVINO, a merchant  
BONARIO, son to Corbaccio  
SIR POLITIC WOULD-BE, a knight  
PEREGRINE, a gentleman traveller  
NANO, a dwarf  
CASTRONE, an eunuch  
ANDROGYNO, an hermaphrodite  
GREGE (or Mob)  
COMMANDATORI, officers of justice  
MERCATORI, three merchants  
AVOCATORI, four magistrates  
NOTARIO, the register  
LADY WOULD-BE, SIR POLITIC'S Wife  
CELIA, CORVINO'S Wife  
SERVITORI, Servants, two waiting-women, &c.

1. Most of the names are Italian, and in that language many of them signify animals. Volpone: "fox." "Magnifico" is not a formal title; it simply means "gentleman." Mosca: "fly." The figure of the parasite implies scavenging, as well as farming dependence. The client-patron relationship in Rome fostered juridical dependents, and Jonson saw similar figures, not only around the English court, but around the big moneymen of London City. Vortore: "vulture." Corbaccio: "vulture." Corvino: "crow." Bonario: "good-natured." Sir Politic Would-be: In the seventeenth century the word "politic" carried overtones of devious and subtle calculation; his name spells out Sir Politic's character, and in its abbreviation ("Pol") suggests further the parrot he is. Peregine: in English a falcon, but the word also associates with "pilgrim," i.e., "traveler." Nano: "dwarf." Castrone: "goblin." Androgyno: from the Greek, "man-woman," i.e., "hermaphrodite." Grege: from the Latin, "mob" or "crowd." Commandator: a not very distinguished title of honor; Jonson assigns them a function akin to sergents or marshals of a court. Mercator: "merchants." Avocatori: properly, in Italian, "prosecutors." Jonson makes them judges. Notario: "recorder." Celia: literally, "heavenly."
Volpone

THE SCENE: VENICE

The Argument

Volpone, childless, rich, feigns sick, despairing,
Offers his state to hopes of several heirs,
Lies languishing; his parasite receives
Presents of all, assures, deludes; then weaves
Other cross plots, which ope themselves, are told,
New tricks for safety are sought; they thrive: when bold,
Each tempts the other again, and all are sold.

Prologue

Now, luck yet send us, and a little wit
Will serve to make our play hit;
According to the palates of the season
Here is rhyme, not empty of reason.
This we were bid to credit from our poet,
Whose true scope, if you would know it,
In all his poems still hath been this measure,
To mix profit with your pleasure.

And not as some, whose threats their envy failing,
Cry hoarsely, All he writes is railing.

And when his plays come forth, think they can flout them,
With saying, he was a year about them.

To these there needs no lie, but this his creature,
Which was two months since no feature;
And though he dares give them five lives to mend it,
'Tis known, five weeks fully penned it,
From his own hand, without a co-adjutor,
Novice, journey-man, or tutor.

Yet thus much I can give you as a token
Of his play's worth, no eggs are broken,
Nor quaking custards with fierce teeth affrighted,
Wherewith your rout are so delighted;

Act I, Scene 1

Nor hales he in a gull's old ends reciting,
To stop gaps in his loose writing;
With such a deal of monstrous and forced action,
As might make Bedlam a faction;
Nor made he his play for jests stolen from each table,
But makes jests to fit his fable;
And so presents quick comedy refined,
As best critics have designed;
The laws of time, place, persons he observeth,
From no needful rule he swerveth.
All gall and copperas from his ink he draineth,
Only a little salt remaineth.
Wherewith he'll rub your cheeks, till, red with laughter,
They shall look fresh a week after.

1. Buffoon. Elizabethans were fond of wise saws and ancient adages ("old ends") and often put into plays characters who recited them.
2. Bethlehem Hospital, the madhouse.
3. The so-called Aristotelian unities, actually imposed as precepts by the Italian Renaissance critics Castelvetro and Scaliger, placed limits of time (should take place within twenty-four hours) and place (should reflect possibilities of genuine travel in the world) on dramatic action; the limitation on persons (should be appropriate to setting and genre) was less strict.
4. Gall and copperas (i.e., green vitriol) are traditional ingredients of ink; both are corrosive and bitter to the taste. Salt, though not an ingredient of ink, is a classical metaphor for wit, that which gives flavor to speech or writing.
5. Though there was no proscenium curtain such as rises on a modern play, in the Elizabethan theater there was a small curtained inner area, and that is what Mosca unveils. By "the world's soul and mine" Volpone means the soul of the universe and his own immortal essence, both identified with gold.
6. The sun peeps through the horns of the constellation "Ram" in the zodiac about the middle of April; cf. Chaucer at the opening of the Canterbury Tales lines 5-8: "When Zephyrus eek with his sweet breath / Inspired hath in every bolt and beeth / The tender cropees, and the yonge somme / Hath in the Ram his halve course yronne."
Corbaccio!—bring him near—we here possess
Thy son of all thy state\(^2\) and confine thee
To the monastery of San Spirito;
Where, since thou know'st not how to live well here,
Thou shalt be learned\(^3\) to die well.

CORBACCIO. Ha! What said he?

COMMANDATORE. You shall know anon, sir.

1 AVOCATORE. Thou, Corvino, shalt
Be straight embarked from thine own house, and rowed
Round about Venice, through the Grand Canal,
Wearing a cap with fair long ass's ears
Instead of horns; and so to mount, a paper
Pinned on thy breast, to the Berlina—

CORVINO. Yes,
And have mine eyes beat out with stinking fish,
Bruised fruit, and rotten eggs—'Tis well. I'm glad
I shall not see my shame yet.

1 AVOCATORE. And to expiate
Thy wrongs done to thy wife, thou art to send her
Home to her father, with her dowry trebled:
And these are all your judgments—

ALL. Honored fathers.

1 AVOCATORE. Which may not be revoked. Now you begin,
When crimes are done, and past, and to be punished,
To think what your crimes are: away with them!
Let all that see these vices thus rewarded,
Take heart, and love to study 'em! Mischiefs feed
Like beasts, till they be fat, and then they bleed. [Exeunt.]

[VOLPONE comes forward.]

The seasoning of a play is the applause.
Now, though the fox be punished by the laws,
He yet doth hope, there is no suffering due,
For any fact which he hath done 'gainst you;
If there be, censure him; here he doubtful stands:
If not, fare jovially, and clap your hands.

[Exit.]

THE END.

1606

1. As is customary in Jonson's plays, the names of his dramatic persons indicate their character. Some that are not especially obvious are: Morose: his name carries the modern meaning of "sullen" but also suggests the older sense of being overly attached to a habit (from the Latin man/moris, custom); Sir Dauphine Eugenie: the dauphin was the successor to the king of France, although Sir Dauphine's name is given in the feminine form—here he is only heir to Morose's estate; Clermont: brightness, clarity; Truewit: "wit" means here not just amusing or clever but denotes one of intellectual ability and talent as well; Epicoene: pertaining to both the male and female sexes; Sir John Daw: his name is reminiscent of the jayhawk, a bird known for its chattering and petty thefts; Thomas Otter: the otter is an amphibious creature who lives on both land and sea, and the Otter marriage is similarly difficult to classify; Lady Centaur: the centaur was a mythological animal who was half horse, half human; Ladies Collegiates: a self-governed academy of women dedicated to a knowledge of literature and society; Mavis: ill-fare; Pretenders: pretenders to the "learning" that the Ladies Collegiates claim to embody.

2. I.e., convey to your son your entire estate.
3. Taught.
4. Pillory.
Prologue

Truth says, of old, the art of making plays
Was to content the people; and their praise
Was to the poet money, wine, and bays; 2
But in this age a sect of writers are,
That only for particular likeing care,
And will taste nothing that is popular.
With such we mingle neither brains nor breasts; 3
Our wishes, like to those make public feasts,
Are not to please the cook’s taste, but the guests.
Yet if those cunning palates hither come,
They shall find guests' entreaty, and good room;
And though all relish not, sure there will be some,
That when they leave their seats shall make them say,
Who wrote that piece, could so have wrote a play;
But that he knew this was the better way.

For, to present all custard or all tart,
And have no other meats to bore a part,
Or to want 4 bread and salt, were but coarse art.
The poet prays you, then, with better thought
To sit; and when his cates 5 are all in brought,
Though there be none far-fet, 6 there will dear-bought
Be, fit for ladies: some for lords, knights, squires;
Some for your waiting-wench, and city-wives; 7
Some for your men and daughters of Whitefriars.
Nor is it only while you keep your seat
Here, that his feast will last; but you shall eat
A week at ordinaries 8 on his broken meat;
If his muse be true,
Who commends her to you.

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2. Laurels, the poet’s crown.
3. Heats.
4. Leak.
5. Dishes.
7. Fancy ladies (from the wires holding up their ruffs). Whitefriars was the London district, named from a long-abolished monastery, where Épicoene was first performed.
8. Public taverns; "broken meats": leftovers.

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Act 1, Scene 1

Another

OCCASIONED BY SOME PERSON'S IMPERTINENT EXCEPTION 9

The ends of all, who for the scene do write,
Are, or should be, to profit and delight.
And still’t hath been the praise of all best times,
So persons were not touched, to tax the crimes.
Then in this play, which we present tonight,
And make the object of your ear and sight,
On forfeit of your selves, think nothing true;
Lest so you make the maker to judge you.
For he knows poet never credit gained
By writing truths, but things like truths, well feigned.
If any yet will, with particular sleight
Of application, west what he doth write,
And that he meant or him or her, will say;
They make a libel, which he made a play.

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ACT 1  SCENE 1. CLERIMONT'S HOUSE

[Enter CLERIMONT, making himself ready, followed by his PAGE.]

CLERIMONT. Have you got the song yet perfect I gave you, boy?

PAGE. Yes, sir.

CLERIMONT. Let me hear it.

PAGE. You shall, sir; but, I’ faith, let nobody else.

CLERIMONT. Why, I pray?

PAGE. It will get you the dangerous name of a poet in town, sir,
besides me a perfect deal of ill will at the mansion you wot of, whose lady is the argument of it; where now I am the welcomest thing under a man that comes there.

CLERIMONT. I think; and above a man, too, if the truth were racked 10 out of you.

PAGE. No, faith, I’ll confess before, sir. The gentlewomen play with

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9. Épicoene got into trouble, and may even have been suppressed on its first run, because of an allusion in Act 5, scene 1, to the prince of Moldavia: he was a fraud who visited England in 1607, talked King James out of some money, and after his departure gave out that he was going to marry the king’s cousin, Lady Arabella Stuart. Since Lady Arabella was, according to the lineage-quests, next in line for the throne of England, both Elizabeth and James had long ago determined that she should not marry. Whether Jonson really alluded to the lady in Act 5 of Épicoene, Arabella thought he did; though out of the royal favor, she was strong enough to have steps taken against Jonson, in response to which he evidently wrote this prologue.
1. Know.
2. The rack was a common instrument of torture for dragging confessions out of criminals.
The Alchemist

The Persons of the Play

SUBLTLE, the alchemist.
FACE, the housekeeper.
DOL COMMON, their colleague.
DAPPER, a clerk.
DRUGGER, a tobacco-man.
LOVWIT, master of the house.
EPICURE MAMMON, a knight.
SURLY, a gamster.
TRIBULATION, a pastor of Amsterdam.
ANANIAS, a deacon there.
KASTRE, the angry boy.
DAME PLIANT, his sister, a widow.
NEIGHBORS, OFFICERS, MUTES.

THE SCENE: LONDON.

The Argument

The sickness hot, a master quit for fear
His house in town, and left one servant there.
Ease him corrupted, and gave means to know
A cheater and his punk, who, now brought low,
Leaving their narrow practice, were become

1. As usual in Jonson's plays, people's names indicate their character. Subtle: reminiscent of the serpent in Genesis, who is "more subtle than any beast of the field" (Gen. 3:1); Face: his name at Lovewit's steward is "Jeremy," but this is the name he uses to perform his swindles, and it suggests the multiplicity of his identities—i.e., he has many "faces"—and also his unreliable nature ("two-faced"); Dole Common: a generic name for a prostitute; Dapper: a small person who is neat, even fustian, in appearance; Drugger: a drugget; Lovewit: one who loves intelligence and ingenuity; Epicure Mammon: An epicurean was one devoted to the pursuit of sensual pleasure, and Mammon was the name given to riches in the New Testament; Surl: saucy, arrogant; Tribulation: suggests the persecutions that the Puritans endured, here used of course comically; Ananias: a name taken from Acts 5:1–10 in the New Testament of a man who tried to withhold money belonging to the Christian community; Kastrel: a small hawk; Dame Plant: yielding, accommodating: Mutes: i.e., characters with no lines to speak.

2. Cozeners.
3. Telling fortunes.
4. Selling familiar spirits, supernatural helpers; "stone": the philosopher's stone, reputed capable of curing all diseases and converting base metals to gold.
5. Smoke.
6. In dismissing fortune for the period of the play, Jonson is appealing to more judicious and rational powers—justice for the author, grace for the actors.
7. Humors are the idiosyncrasies of individual temperaments, caused, according to the old medical theories, by an imbalance among the four basic humors of the body, choleric, phlegmatic, blood, and black bile: "rage" (line 10) includes the idea of inspiration; "spleen" (line 11): the seat of passionate laughter or mirth.
8. Even those who share in the follies mocked onstage will be able to see (recognize) and yet not own (admit to) them.